G. J. FOCK, Dr. phil.
McGREGOR MEMORIAL MUSEUM,
KIMBERLEY.

Preliminary Archæological Survey of the Witsand

Apart from the Vaal River area, the North-Western Cape is only very little known from an archaeological point of view. J. P. Johnson (1906) describes implements from various sites in the Herbert, Hay, and Prieska districts, and from the Asbestos Mountains. B. D. Malan excavated the Wonderwerk Cave near Kuruman where Fauresmith, Middle Stone Age and Smithfield were found. From the Koning Native Reserve van Hoepen (1928) reported Smithfield A.

In March, 1959, the present writer had an opportunity of touring the western parts of Griqualand West when he was able to make collections of surface finds from some 60 sites. The most westerly point reached on this tour was the Witsand dunes. The "Witsand", famous for the "roaring sands", is a complex of white dunes on the western side of the Langeberge bordering the Kalahari. The dunes extend for about 5-6 miles in a generally north-east-south-west direction. The average width is about 1.6 miles, the total area thus being about 8 square miles. The white sand of the Witsand dunes is surrounded by red sand from the Kalahari. The western ridges of the dunes show a steep drop of 75 feet to the plain. At the southern end, where the famous "roaring" may best be observed, the dunes are very steep too and a rocky koppie terminates the Witsand.

The north-eastern part of the Witsand has flat dunes partly overlying an old pan. The dunes are separated by relatively broad valleys. They are partly in movement; this may be observed near a windmill at the northern part where a fence is nearly totally covered by sand. But on the whole the dunes are stable. It is generally said that the red and white sands do not mix. But observation of some samples of sand from different sites showed that the white sand contains a certain percentage of grains coated with iron oxide. This phenomenon needs further investigation.

During the recent visit the author was able to collect implements from a number of sites on the Witsand. Usually the visitors to this area are interested in the "roaring sands" at the southern part, which "roar" best during the dry season. Visitors camp near a windmill on the farm Doornaar about half a mile from the homestead. Not far from this camping spot stone implements are to be found predominantly microliths. There is also a family of Coloureds living on the farm who, according to their story, are related to the Rehoboth Basters. This is probably correct as they make "karosses" of goat- and game-skins using the same technique as the Rehoboth Basters in South West. Visitors as well as these Coloureds seem to have collected a large number of microliths and crescents over the years so that these have

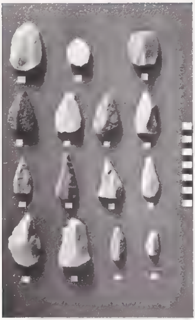


Fig. 1

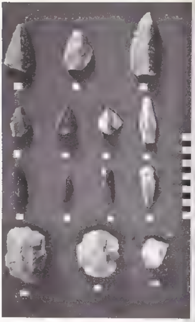


Fig. 2

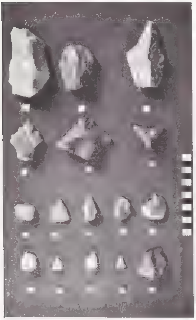


Fig. 3

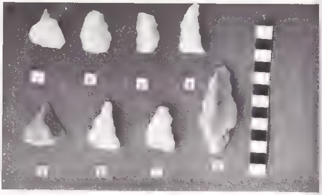


Fig. 4

now become very rare near the camping site. The writer is not aware of any publication on these Witsand implements: they are probably lost to science. The future field-worker must bear in mind that the areas most visited on the Witsand are left with only a selection of artefacts from which crescents and similar artefacts are missing.

Nevertheless the Witsand still abounds in stone implements, mainly far off the roads in the midst of the dunes.

The water-table is not very deep and water is to be found only a few feet below the surface. The supply is quite strong but its source is unknown. Obviously it does not depend on local rainfall for during the last year the water level in the test-hole rose by several inches although only very little rain had fallen in that area and there are some six windmills which pump water for cattle. This water-table is not connected with the groundwater in the surrounding plain (red sand) where the bore-holes and wells are rather deep.

Thus we find plenty of water in the Witsand dunes even in a semi-arid climate. That the dunes must be of a great age is indicated by the large camelthorn trees, possibly up to 350 years old, growing at their foot near the homestead. The water-table in the Kalahari itself is about 290 feet below the surface, the difference in level between the two water surfaces is therefore well over 300 feet. According to van der Walt (1940) the water occurring on the top of the white sand dunes does not seem to be a surface phenomenon but is evidently connected to a subterranean source under high pressure charged with appreciable amounts of lime in solution. This dissolved lime, together with the iron compounds cementing the sand grains, thus builds up an impervious funnel-shaped ring by which the water is prevented from draining away into the loose sand. Where the water can rise in this way to moisten the surface layer, wind-blown material will naturally accumulate.

In the north-eastern part of the Witsand the writer collected 385 implements and artefacts from the surface between the dunes and at their feet. This site is not far from an old pan. (See map after *S.A. Geographical Journal*, Vol. XIX, December 1936, Lewis). The collection comprises two different cultures: Middle Stone Age and Wilton. The implements are made of greyish quartzite and milky quartz, and a few of chert. The quartzite implements are very wind-worn and show a desert glaze.

(1) The **Cores** are Levallois disc-cores. The largest has a diameter of 9.5 cm.

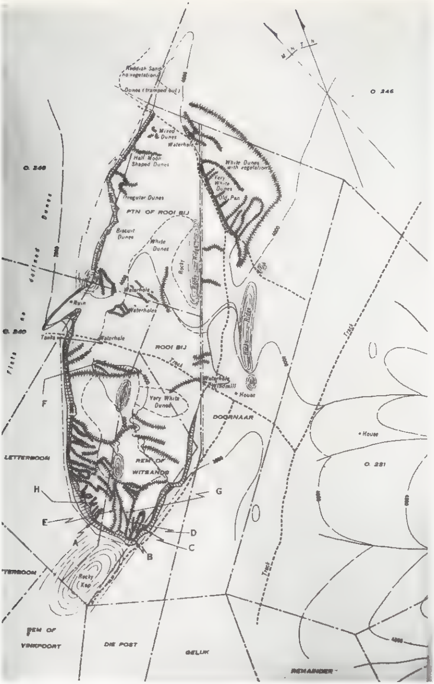
(2) **Points.** Some points with convergent flaking show no secondary trimming after they had been struck from the core. The butt end is faceted. The main feature of these points is their breadth, the broadest, which is broken, measuring 4.4 cm. (fig. 1).

(3) **Trimmed Points.** There are a few slender flakes with faceted platform (fig. 1). They show secondary trimming on their dorsal face only. The trimming is along both edges or along one edge only. One implement shows a reduction of the bulb. There is one point with a high keel on the upper face of the point end. One edge shows a secondary trimming with alternating blows giving a serrated edge. The measurements of this implement are: length 8.6 cm., width 4.9 cm., thickness 2.5 cm. The lower end of the dorsal face is trimmed, the secondary working is shallow (figs. 11, 3).

The other implements include flakes with straight striking platforms. One of these (11 cm. long, 6.8 cm. broad) shows a crude backing along one edge: other flakes have serrated edges.

A second group of implements is made of milky quartz (fig. 4). Among these we find borers, a backed blade and other implements with faceted platforms, though rather high-backed with a steep secondary trimming, and thin sidescrapers.

Another Witsand site was found nearby in the midst of dunes near a pool of open water. Here the dunes are high with the valleys between some 20 yards wide. The implements found in these valleys are of quartz and some are very wind-worn. They comprise small flakes (2.3 cm. long, 0.9 cm. broad and 0.3 cm. thick) showing no secondary trimming, microlithic



Witsand after Lewis, 1956

burins, small points (1.2 cm. long, 0.8 cm. broad at the base), a few crescents and one core. The crescents are very rare for the reasons mentioned above. This assemblage is a typical Wilton site with many rejects, indicating that the implements were made at this spot.

At this locality, however, some other implements of quartzite which are not Wilton were also found. Among them are: one clumsy backed blade (fig. 4, 8) 7.8 cm. long, 3.3 cm. wide, 1.7 cm. thick, and two cores. Unfortunately this assemblage is too small and undefined to provide clear evidence but I suspect traces of Magosian influence here.

About half a mile distant from the camping site there is another Wilton site, situated on a shallow fixed dune on the border of the main dune area. The collection consists of horseshoe scrapers, thumbnail scrapers, crescents, cores, borers, small points and tiny flakes; some ostrich egg shells and pottery sherds were also recovered.

The southern end of the Witsand between the "roaring sands" and the rocky koppie produced a similar assemblage of Wilton implements and some cores, the latter probably of Middle Stone Age. One of these cores had been used as a chopper.

As mentioned before the Basters are collecting crescents and I obtained a rather good collection from them. The individual localities from whence these come are unknown, but I was assured that they all come from the central part of the Witsand complex. It is worthy of note that among this collection of 60 microliths there is not one double crescent.

To sum up the following may be stated. The area to which only a flying visit was paid seems to be worth a thorough study. At the moment there is not enough material available to permit a comprehensive account. So much, however, can be said. The Witsand has been inhabited since at least Middle Stone Age times. Sites on both the northern and southern parts yielded Middle Stone Age and Wilton implements. The water-table of the Witsand must therefore have been accessible during at least the past 20,000 years. Even during the period following Middle Stone Age this water-table must have been constant enabling Magosian people to live here at the fringe of the Kalahari. It was an ideal site for Wilton people. The ones living here differed from their cousins in the Cape in so far as they used single crescents only instead of both single and double ones.

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